



# Local Organization Responses to Black Lives Matters Protests: Embracing an “Ethic of Care” When Engaging Community Crises by Convention Visitors Bureaus

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## ABSTRACT

Since the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis, at least 140 cities across the United States have experienced protests resulting in vandalism, looting, shootings, and other violence. These protests represent a challenge for community organizations such as convention and visitors bureaus (CVBs), whose responsibility is to promote their local community as a place for tourism, meetings, conferences, and other activities. This study explores the response of *Visit Aurora*, a Colorado CVB to engage their local protests inspired by the BLM movement, and a local case—the death of Elijah McClain. Within the paper a model for crisis engagement will be discussed, including the ethical responsibilities of institutions to support stakeholders even when they may not be directly responsible for the harms they have experienced.

**KEYWORDS:** ethic of care, BLM, Black Lives Matter, community organizations, CVB, Elijah McClain

## Introduction

During the Summer of 2020, in the midst of the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, protests in more than 140 cities across the United States erupted in response to the deaths of George Floyd in Minneapolis and other Black Americans resulting from

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police violence around the country. The names of other victims—Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, Philando Castile, Alton Sterling, Delrawn Small, Tamir Rice, and others—have been used to generate support for protests, marches, and confrontations that have included in some cases acts of violence, property damage, injuries, and even deaths. In 2020, nine people killed in protests were taking part in a Black Lives Matters (BLM) demonstration (Beckett, 2020).

These localized protests draw attention and conflict to communities, retail areas, and communal spaces that can influence the public's perceptions in terms of local crime and safety, law enforcement practices, and attractiveness for the purposes of meetings, leisure, relocation, travel, and tourism. Representing these communities to both internal and external stakeholders is a convention and visitors bureau (CVB) or destination marketing organization's (DMO) responsibility. These organizations specifically promote their communities and stakeholders to enhance local economic development and reputation. When a crisis occurs that impacts the public's views of the community, public relations and marketing planning must adapt and reconsider how the organization plans to respond to internal and external stakeholders needs (Fall, 2004).

This paper investigates the response by *Visit Aurora* as part of a larger public relations and strategic communication question and challenge: when and how to respond to a crisis that you have limited influence or responsibility for without compromising your own mission as an organization? In the process of analyzing this case study, this paper will explore the importance for CVBs to respond to community crises that impact their stakeholders and to identify the value of a crisis engagement strategy for other organizations on the periphery of any crisis.

To conduct this analysis, two theoretical perspectives will be developed for this assessment of *Visit Aurora's* efforts to respond to their local crisis. First the "ethic of care" perspective will be explored to articulate and explain the motivations and responsibility of this organization in the context of this crisis. Second, the incidental crisis response model will be presented to provide a framework to understand the challenges faced by *Visit Aurora* and

to situate an ethic of care into the communication strategy for the CVB and other organizations when faced with a crisis response challenge.

Next, an analysis of how the *Visit Aurora* crisis developed and has drawn the convention and visitors bureau into the crisis. The organization's response and their strategy will be assessed. Finally, the results of their efforts will be discussed for the sake of evaluating the role of CVBs in community crises, and how this study reinforces the value of an ethic of care response and its role in determining an incidental crisis response model strategy for any organization facing a crisis within their community or industry.

### **Ethics and Crisis Communication**

Crises have been experienced by many organizations over time and, as such, they exhibit characteristics that help us to define them and to explore appropriate responses. Ulmer et al. (2019) have defined a crisis as: "a specific, unexpected, and nonroutine event or series of events that create high levels of uncertainty and simultaneously present an organization with both opportunities for and threats to its high-priority goals" (p. 7). During crises, ethical challenges are likely to develop as stakeholders and communities face potential harms or actual threats to physical safety, psychological well-being, or economic status. Crisis response can not only affect the organization responding to the event, but the stakeholders as well. Because crises are often high-stakes situations, these strategies are imbued with ethical implications that make crisis communication a practice of ethical decision-making and action (Linsley & Slack, 2013; Sandin, 2009; Sellnow & Seeger, 2013; Ulmer et al., 2019).

A variety of ethical frameworks have been recommended as appropriate for incorporation into crisis management strategies. Sellnow and Seeger (2013) suggest that these can function much like theories, they can explain how the values they represent influence behaviors and decisions, and may also inform practices during a crisis. Since a crisis often exhibits characteristics such as uncertainty, chaos, rapid response times, and ambiguity, an ethical perspective may be invaluable to guide decision-making and actions under the pressures of the situation. The nature of a crisis

is also capable of revealing the ethical values of organizations and their leadership by exploring the choices made by them in the difficult moments of a crisis situation (Ulmer et al., 2019).

Three general ethical frameworks suggested by scholarship on crisis and ethics include justice, virtue, and care approaches (Linsley & Slack, 2013). The first type, justice, has multiple variations including social justice, distributive justice, and restorative justice (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). Indicators that a crisis response strategy is employing a justice ethical approach include characteristics such as: the use of logical reasoning to create an impartial assessment of the situation, the use of scientific and objective evidence, inclusion of third parties to support fairness, avoidance of personal feelings and relationships that might bias judgement, and protection of individual rights for all involved in the crisis (Tao & Kim, 2017).

The virtue ethics approach has a focus on the dispositions of the leader or organization as a primary means to understanding the crisis response strategy (Elley-Brown & Pringle, 2021). As an ethics approach, virtue reflects on “who you are” and that “intentions matter” when considering an ethic of virtue approach to a crisis (Bauman, 2011, p. 283). For example, when CEOs Aaron Feuerstein and Milt Cole experienced tragic fires at their businesses, their responses toward their employees and efforts to rebuild their organizations were viewed as virtuous responses that reflected on them as leaders and individuals, not as business strategies (Seeger & Ulmer, 2001, *Virtuous responses to organizational crisis: Aaron Feuerstein and Milt Cole*).

A third approach to an ethical response to crisis is an ethic of care. It represents an ethical commitment that supports the needs of stakeholders to organizations. Seeger (1997) explains that advocates for a stakeholder orientation “argue that the interests, needs, and concerns of these constituencies should be taken into account in the organization’s decision-making and problem-solving process” (p. 139). By focusing on stakeholders, the concern shifts to multiple constituents for organizations and addressing relationships with stakeholders and organizations (Xu & Li, 2013). A stakeholder perspective supports the idea that “an ethic of care emphasizes the creation or strengthening of relationships among people” (Simola, 2003, p. 35).

## **The Ethic of Care and Crisis Communication**

Unlike the ethic of justice or virtue, the ethic of care is responsive to the relationships individuals or organizations have and need to nurture during a crisis or other conflicts. The ethic of care has evolved to represent an area of ethical theory that has been recognized and referenced in many social science and humanities disciplines. It is rooted in the complexity of relationships among communities for both personal and professional reasons and has implications in many configurations: local, global, gendered, power, and oppression (Koggel & Orme, 2010).

As an approach that is stakeholder-focused, the ethic of care recognizes that in a crisis, there may be “victims—individuals, communities and organizations harmed by the events in the form of physical, psychological or economic losses. The crisis creates a unique circumstance with victims experiencing high emotional distress, stress, a sense of loss, hopelessness and fear” (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013, p. 228). To be an organization that embraces an ethic of care means that it should be “involved rather than detached” during a crisis, sensitive to emotional needs, be capable of expressing “sympathy and compassion,” and capable of “tailoring organizational decisions, action, and communication based upon the needs and feelings of publics” (Tao & Kim, 2017, p. 693).

When engaged in an ethic of care, an organization may be evaluated as it demonstrates a sensitivity to the needs of their stakeholders. The use of a care ethic should be capable of increasing a form of engagement that is “authentically responsive,” and “also increase the probability of identifying creative, or, win-win solutions” (Simola, 2005, p. 344). This problem-solving approach would not be one based on a logical ethic of justice perspective, but instead focused “on the narrative and contextual complexities of relationships among people,” and “the concern that one is not helping when one could be” (Simola, 2003, p. 354).

This concept of an ethic of care provides both a justification for its use by an organization as well as criteria for its assessment. Because the ethic of care is a stakeholder-based approach, it respects the relational obligations of an organization to multiple publics—both internal and external. It provides a means to explain

and answer questions about choices and action by organizations and as a moral theory, it may assist to “clarify actions and decisions” by organizations during times of uncertainty and chaos (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013, p. 231).

### **The Incidental Crisis Response Model**

When a crisis arises in a community or industry, there are organizations with a variety of degrees of involvement or responsibility for the challenges the crisis raises. In some cases, organizations are directly responsible for the problem, in others they may be held responsible based on stakeholders’ perception of responsibility, or they may simply be bystanders or even victims of a crisis they have no responsibility for or direct capacity to solve. No matter the degree of involvement or responsibility, many organizations still may choose whether to engage in the crisis. How they make the decision to involve themselves represents a strategic perspective on crisis and can be discussed in the context of an incidental crisis response model.

After the 2011 accident at the Fukushima power plant in Japan, Brand (2012) explored responses by the nuclear power industry worldwide to the crisis. He found that even though other operators and even advocates for nuclear energy were not directly responsible for or involved in the tragedy in Japan, they chose to communicate about the crisis and its implications for the nuclear power industry, their stakeholders, and how it might impact their own facilities and practices. He argued that any crisis can result in organizations that become incidental participants by choice, proximity, or industry. They may choose to interact during the crisis for the purpose of protecting their own mission, reputation, or stakeholders; even if they are not directly expected to be a part of the crisis response (Brand, 2012).

The incidental crisis response model consists of four parts. First, it requires that organizations assess whether to ignore or to participate in a crisis. If participation is warranted, the model identifies three crisis management strategies and message types appropriate for a response by an organization that has a low degree of responsibility for the crisis, but high regard for their stakeholders and

relationships with them. The three messaging strategies include detachment, model and anti-model arguments, and a rhetoric of renewal. Each strategy is available for the incidental response individually or in some combination to reinforce the relationship between the organization and stakeholders and to provide a strategic response to the crisis.

Perceptions of responsibility for the crisis and the potential for doing more harm than good by becoming involved should be determined first. Even if an organization is not directly responsible for a crisis, stakeholders may still have the perception that an organization is somehow responsible for it, and therefore a response is necessary. While some models assume the organization is somehow responsible, like the image restoration theory (IRT) which assumes both that a “reprehensible act” has occurred and that the organization is at least partially responsible or believed to be responsible by audiences (Benoit, 1995, p. 72) or situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) based on attributions for responsibility for a crisis and offers responses based on the type and degree of responsibility the organization is held to by audiences (Coombs & Holladay, 2004), they do not account as effectively for low blame contexts. The incidental crisis response model is most appropriate when there is a low attribution of responsibility, real or perceptual. This allows the organization the option to choose whether to engage in the crisis. If it was considered responsible for the crisis, an alternative set of strategies like IRT or SCCT could be more appropriate.

How organizations should respond and engage during a crisis is a strategic decision. When the organization has low attributions for causing the crisis or solving it, the choice to participate is mostly voluntary. Under these conditions, making the decision to engage during a crisis means assessing the responsibilities that the organization has toward stakeholders and making a strategic choice based on both practical reasons for participating and the assessment of any ethical motivations or expectations to respond. The decision to respond to the crisis may depend on the theory of ethics (justice, virtue, care, or some other approach) that most appropriately represents the situation and the organizational



perspective. The ethical orientation behind the decision may serve to frame decision-making, communication, and actions in response to the crisis and can be reflected by the other parts of the model. The three ethical orientations might explain that sense of obligation, yet the ethic of care is the most appropriate from the perspective of the incidental crisis response model.

The ethic of care approach is not impartial or objective like an ethic of justice, it is not dependent on the individual ethical values of leadership or an organization's mission, it emphasizes the relationships it seeks to strengthen and a "concern about how to fulfill conflicting responsibilities to different people" (Bauman, 2011, p. 284). This ethical approach is considered "relevant to organizational crisis communication as publics demand a great amount of attention and care from the organization in events of extremity" (Tao & Kim, 2017, p. 693). An ethic of care presents a strong motivation for an organization to make the decision to engage in a crisis, although it should not be considered an exclusive reason for that decision.

Once an organization has chosen engagement as a response, three message strategies recommended by the model can help structure the organization's response: detachment, model and anti-model arguments, and renewal rhetoric. The first message strategy, detachment, is designed to protect the organization and avoid increasing the level of attribution for responsibility for the crisis. Two stances including denial and differentiation are the best methods to accomplish this goal (Hearit, 1995). Denial approaches help distance the organization from being blamed for the crisis. Differentiation may isolate the organization from responsibility, allow for a focus on other issues as explanation for their involvement for the crisis, and develop a more positive appearance to the public.

Maintaining low attribution for the crisis can be further protected through model and anti-model arguments that identify the negative (anti-model) actions and arguments responsible for the crisis and offering alternative positive (model) efforts by the organization engaging in the crisis. Past research into model and anti-model activities have revealed their efficacy in advocating



for pro-social behaviors, restoring confidence in an organization's reputation after a scandal, altering audience perceptions of reality, and for advocating values of leadership (Sheppard et al., 2020).

Finally, renewal rhetoric continues the process of moving the engaging organization away from responsibility for the crisis and serving to redirect attention toward opportunities for the organization to transform the crisis in positive ways. It is a leadership-based discourse that provides a prospective, forward-looking approach that supports the decision by the organization to engage in the crisis for the opportunities it offers as the crisis transforms and renews the community and stakeholder. The renewal strategy can also amplify the ethical nature of the crisis and the ethic of care being used to justify the organization's participation in the crisis (Ulmer et al., 2007).

### **George Floyd Protests, BLM, Elijah McClain, and Visit Aurora's Response**

Within a month of the death of George Floyd, protests across the country had escalated, fueled by the Minneapolis case and then reinforced by localized conflicts over additional racial incidents involving police and Black citizens. In Aurora, Colorado, Elijah McClain was an unarmed 23-year-old Black man who died in August of 2019 after an encounter with police who responded to a 911 call reporting a suspicious Black man dancing to music wearing a ski mask. He was restrained by police, became agitated, and medics injected an accidental overdose of the sedative Ketamine, that led to a heart attack and brain death. The Aurora police have been subjected to other racial incident investigations, including current ones by the Department of Justice Civil Rights Division and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (Roberts, 2020a).

The escalation of activism and protests over this case led to negative national publicity in this case. On June 27, hundreds gathered to protest the McClain killing, blocking a highway and playing tributes to McClain on violins. They were met with riot police using pepper spray, smoke, and, unconfirmed at the time, tear gas to break up the protest. The event followed 1 month after George Floyd was killed in Minneapolis. By this time, the McClain

case had received national publicity and attention by major news sources and celebrities tweeting support for the protests and for more investigation into his death (Roberts, 2020b). Later incidents have also added to tensions in the community. Police officers were revealed to have taken photos at the memorial site of McClain's death, mocking the chokehold placed on him, and sending them to other officers. Three have been fired and another resigned. Their actions have contributed to the build-up of anger in the community. Multiple investigations including by the State of Colorado have occurred. The police and city have been sued and charged with past civil right violations. All of these have led protesters and community members to claim that the city and police were not responding actively enough in response to outrage created by the situation (Snowdon & Stringer, 2020).

*Visit Aurora* is not a government agency or have any official authority for this case. But as a visible advocate for the community and responsible to its stakeholders to promote local businesses, they therefore have a stake in this crisis. Social media monitoring showed comments about the case on Instagram posts, email accounts, and social accounts for *Visit Aurora* and related tourism sites in the area and state. Some of the *Visit Aurora's* stakeholders have made their own statements about the case supporting the investigations and advocating for greater scrutiny of the police department's treatment of minorities.

After working with the marketing department for *Visit Aurora*, and then consulting a local public relations agency, the President/CEO for *Visit Aurora*, Bruce Dalton, posted a blog statement on the organization's website, "Where We Stand: Systemic Equality" (Dalton, 2020). Analysis of this statement reveals an effort to address the crisis and to make their mission part of the effort to resolve it. By identifying elements of the incidental crisis engagement model and the ethic of care within this statement, the value of the model and the strategic opportunity this statement represents for *Visit Aurora* is more evident.

The blog post leads with a justification for engaging the Elijah McClain case, specifically mentioning his name in the first sentence and reflecting on frustrations in the community. Dalton makes a claim to be called to engage in issues of diversity as the

leader of an organization that represents a “diversity of people and cultures that have made Aurora their home” (Dalton, 2020). It is not a statement acknowledging a responsibility for the crisis but rather a commitment to pursue larger goals in response to the crisis at hand.

An ethic of care is visible in the first few paragraphs of the blog statement. The motivation and reasons for engaging *Visit Aurora* in this crisis are not professional reasons related to protecting reputation or economic interests. He states explicitly, that they “cannot exclusively promote this great city—we must also commit to tangible steps that ensure equality for all who live and visit here” (Dalton, 2020). The care for community is clearly spelled out in the effort to support the relationships and stakeholders they have with the incentive to “stand with you, our friends, neighbors, and partners, in never backing down from this mission” (Dalton, 2020). The blog post also emphasizes their intention to partner with local organizations and tourism industry organizations to support diversity initiatives. This action is also a response to an ethic of care that utilizes “community-based networks of support” (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013, p. 223).

Once an argument in favor of engagement has been established, using an ethic of care as part of the reasoning and motivation, Dalton describes the goals of the organization using a claim of dissociation, focusing not on its role in creating the crisis, but instead its responsibility to take steps to promote equality in the community. This statement assumes no blame or attribution for creating this crisis, but it considers itself a part of the resolution for the crisis. He argues that *Visit Aurora* can engage in change for the community.

The nature of that change is evident in a series of specific actions the organization proposes to take to move in the direction of improving those conditions in the community the crisis has revealed. This represents the implementation of model and anti-model argumentation by revealing model behaviors and changes they intend to make. Although there is little mention of anti-model examples or arguments beyond the death of McClain and others, the claims made by Dalton are establishing the model to be followed by the organization in several ways. The anti-model

examples are implied by considering the opposite results if *Visit Aurora* did not make these commitments and take these steps.

For example, the blog post identifies model discourses including “engage in conversations that have already been initiated,” focusing all tourism marketing efforts to “reflect the racial and cultural diversity of our community,” and nurturing and promoting “Black-owned business as well as BIPOC organizations and events” (Dalton, 2020). The statement also reinforced model behaviors by the *Visit Aurora* organization itself to promote hiring practices that reflect the diversity of the community, institute unconscious bias training, supporting and promoting similar initiatives with community and professional partners. This statement was specific and detailed in its identification of how they intended to engage with this crisis and take action with their stakeholders, internal and external. It was not simply a passive statement supporting the cause and issues raised by the protests.

Finally, this statement also functions in the spirit of the rhetoric of renewal approach to crises. It spelled out those efforts they planned to pursue in the future and to transform their organization. They identified this statement and commitment to action as a first effort to address these topics. “This is just a beginning. We are driven by the need to find every avenue to stand for justice” (Dalton, 2020). As a commitment by the President/CEO of the organization, this blog statement is an example of the leadership enhancing potential in renewal arguments by granting the organization the opportunity to lead in a crisis they did not create but have chosen to embrace and engage with as a community partner.

## Conclusion

When *Visit Aurora* made the decision to make a statement about the Elijah McClain case and to commit to changes in their organization to support equality and diversity issues in their community, they made the decision to engage in a crisis they did not have to. Other Aurora officials and agencies had not responded as clearly or forcefully, some denied the problems and charges. The publicity of the case, reinforced with other past incidents, has labeled the community as potentially racist and dangerous. News about the case continues to bring the community into the public eye and has

reinforced its failures to officially address his death to the satisfaction of family and activists (Jimenez et al., 2021).

The advantages to an organization that chooses to engage in a crisis situation without needing to are evident in this case. *Visit Aurora* was able to take a leadership position on this issue. Their statement established them as a leader to their stakeholders and to members of the community looking for community support outside of the Black community, to stand up for the issues. It provided them with a blueprint for change and to also define and create a plan for greater engagement based on their own approach. By articulating their position on the crisis, *Visit Aurora* was able to distance themselves from blame and identify with potential solutions. They also developed a stronger foundation with their stakeholders to do their work more effectively.

Other CVBs and destination marketing organizations made decisions to engage and support the activists. *Meet Minneapolis* has been heavily engaged with the community after George Floyd's death and efforts to recover from the riots. *Discover Atlanta*, *Visit Baltimore*, and *Visit Detroit*, to name a few, have issued and posted in support of BLM protesters. This experience may alter the way these types of organizations and their industry participate in communities during a crisis, not just to boost their public profile, but to also be a participant and advocate in issues confronting their publics and stakeholders.

This paper also has served to reveal the challenges and opportunities that organizations might face when trying to decide whether they should remain silent on crises or engage them actively. The incidental crisis response model identifies argument goals and strategies that can help make engagement in a crisis beneficial to an organization. For any crisis, there are many organizations and individuals that have the option to participate or avoid a crisis. Although there is a tendency to want to avoid and distance oneself from a crisis, a strategic and proactive approach to engage in controversial issues and situations may benefit organizations far more than trying to hide from them. The ethic of care can serve as a justification and guide for organizations to consider when struggling with the question of whether to engage and participate in a crisis they could easily ignore or avoid.

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